

ISSUE: Tribal Diversity within the Indigenous Peoples of the North American Continent.

BACKGROUND:

Whenever introducing literature or lessons involving native peoples, it is important to take note of the specific tribal orientation of the peoples being discussed. For instance if one were reading I Heard the Owl Call My Name, a common high school novel, it is essential to note that while the Kwakiutl and Haida tribes may share many similarities with other Northwest tribes, they are very different from say, the Plains tribes. In addition even amongst the Kwakiutl and Haida tribes, which are closely related, there are unique and specific beliefs and practices that belong to one tribe or the other alone. Such is the case for all indigenous peoples. All indigenous peoples on the North American continent did not evolve from the same group of “original” people. The tribes of North America are indigenous or original in and of themselves. While there may be a few tribal groups that developed after splintering events, most American Indians have their own unique language origins, migration patterns, and cultural histories.

A common misconception among students and people in general is that “Indians” are all the same. They live in teepees, wear buckskin and feathers, and eat buffalo three meals a day. When several different tribes are lumped together and given general characteristics that describe “Indians” within the context of a lesson on “Native Americans”, teachers become guilty of “PanIndianism”. PanIndianism occurs commonly in media portrayals of different native groups and this practice is consistently recognizable to those who have learned to practice cultural specificity. As a teacher you can expect to run across films where a violent Pawnee, speaking Sioux, is wearing Cheyenne beadwork. While you may not have a complete knowledge of the many and varied indigenous languages and clothing patterns, once you become aware of the idea of PanIndianism you will be able to recognize it more frequently, thus avoiding the pitfalls stereotype can quickly bring into the educational setting.

PanIndianism also comes in the form of generalizing “Indian” practices and assuming that all tribes believed in doing things the same way. For instance, it is common for children to believe that Indians always scalp you if they catch you because that always happens in the movies. In truth, however, an idea of this kind is completely foreign to many native cultures. The Crows, for instance, rarely practiced violent warfare. Instead they valued self-control and the honoring of man who could face his enemy at arms-length range, count coups, and live to tell about it. When confronting another tribe, the Crows frequently would send out their one best warrior to face an offending tribe’s best warrior and would not engage in mass slaughters of the enemy. The idea of warring tribes is highly overrated in media images of American Indians.

EXAMPLE LESSONS

Title: Guided Indigenous Peoples' Research

Standard: 1.) explain the history, culture, and current status of American Indian tribes in Montana and the United States 2.) describe and compare ways in which people in different regions of the world interact with their physical environments

Grade Level: Can be adapted for 4th, 8th, or 11th grade.

Lesson: Students will list as a class what they think they already know about Indians or Native Americans. After listing, students will execute guided research using the following format and working in pairs. Students will need access to the internet or library where they have research resources. For younger students, if you would like to pre-screen the information they should use for accuracy and authenticity, the teacher should provide a list of websites where the information can be obtained, or provide a stack of books or other resources they can use. It will also be necessary to simplify the table provided below.

Format for Guided Research: (Critical use of resources is necessary for this inquiry)

1. How many Indian tribes are there in Montana (or in North America if you will be learning about tribes in Canada, or other states)? What are they?
2. (Get more specific – narrow in towards your specific emphasis) What tribes are considered Northwest tribes? Where is each located on the map?
3. Which Northwestern tribe is described in our literature?
4. Use the past, present, future table to organize the facts you can find about this tribe.

	Past	Present	Future
Government (How is the leadership organized?)			
Place of Residence (Where is the tribe located?)			
Social Organization (What constitutes a family unit, what are the support systems?)			

Important Cultural Beliefs (What ideas are central to the decisions that are made? Who are the heroes in the culture?)			
Economic Status or Beliefs (How do they feel about money, land, or other forms of commerce? How do they define wealth?)			
Sacred Sites (What are the places of spiritual power or cultural significance?)			
Art (What are the trends in visual, performing, and literary arts?)			
Traditional Ceremonies and Customs			
Language Spoken and Roots of This Language			
Stories of Migration and Origin (Where do these people believe they came from?)			

Assessment: Compile a comprehensive table on the board or butcher paper with all of the class information. When you begin your subsequent lessons students should be able to demonstrate an appreciation for the specific details of the tribe they have researched.